

# Creative Disorientation: The Challenges of Studying, and Teaching, Atlantic World History



Designing an Atlantic world course, which I first taught in 2006-2007, was an intellectual experiment for me, as I imagine it is for most who teach Atlantic world history. As a graduate student, I specialized in early American history and did my supporting coursework in early modern European history; I never opened a book on colonial Latin America, and although the Caribbean figured regularly in seminar discussions, I didn't study it in a systematic way. When, around 2005, I searched the Web for sample syllabi, it struck me that other historians were suffering from similar limitations. Most of the "Atlantic World" syllabi I found were really syllabi of the British Atlantic; others were essentially syllabi of the French Atlantic. Few crossed national lines in more than a token manner.

In the intervening eight years, the trickle of publishing on Atlantic world history has turned into a cascade. Today, teachers of Atlantic world history can turn to Bernard Bailyn's *Atlantic History: Concept and Contours* for an introduction to the Atlantic world as an intellectual concept, to Karen Kupperman's *The Atlantic in World History* for an introduction to the basic storyline, to textbooks such as Thomas Benjamin's for models of a comprehensive, transnational approach, and to a host of essay collections that illuminate specific aspects of Atlantic world history. Teachers of Atlantic world history can also look to the rich literature on the history of Atlantic slavery, which includes many works that model trans-Atlantic and trans-regional thinking; John Thornton's *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World* and Ira Berlin's *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery*

*in North America* are two personal favorites that have shaped how I present this material to my students. And yet, despite the abundance of resources, it remains difficult to design a coherent course on the Atlantic world.

The first dilemma is: How should the course move forward, and what should the storyline be? Atlantic world courses tend to be web-like rather than linear. There is no central political narrative, because there was no single political power; in fact, it's impossible to reckon up exactly how many different governments participated in the creation and development of the Atlantic world. Textbook authors have responded to this by deemphasizing political themes in favor of economic and social ones. Kupperman's overview of the field intertwines economic and intellectual themes. *The Atlantic World*, by Douglas R. Egerton, et al., focuses mainly on social history and favors diplomatic themes such as "European Rivalries and Atlantic Repercussions" or "War, Reform, and Resistance" over political ones; there is little treatment of the internal organization of any of the European empires or, for that matter, of the Aztec and Inca empires. Thomas Benjamin's textbook, which is the most politically oriented of those currently available, balances discussion of imperial strategies and organization with broad social themes such as Native American-European interactions, slavery, and gender.



De Soto's Discovery of the Mississippi," engraving by Robert Metzeroth after William Powell, part of the set National Rotunda Pictures, pub. C. Bohn (Washington, D.C., 1858-1864). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

I wonder if Atlantic world textbooks have retreated too far from political themes. In practice, I have usually assigned separate textbooks on colonial North America and colonial Latin America instead of a single Atlantic world text so that I can ask students to read about and compare the structure of the various European imperial governments in the Americas. Other readings briefly introduce West African and Native American governments. But while I prefer to address political themes more than most Atlantic world textbooks do, I do so with the caveat that political power in the Atlantic world—European, Native American, or African—was so often contested or ineffective. One of my favorite reading assignments in my Atlantic world course is Jack P. Greene's essay "Transatlantic Colonization and the Redefinition of Empire in the Early Modern Era: The British-American Experience," which challenges students to consider how European nations struggled to establish control of the lands they supposedly held and the peoples (including their own immigrants) who were supposedly subject to their authority.

Another challenge for teachers of Atlantic world history is helping students

find the human interest in the course. With the exception of a few explorers and a few revolutionaries, it's hard to name anyone who was a towering figure in the history of the Atlantic world as a whole; one cannot rely on tales of great individuals to drive the story forward. The narratives about the Atlantic world that historians construct in print and in the classroom usually turn less on specific events than on broader trends and changes: "contact," depopulation and repopulation, the expansion of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the rise of plantation agriculture, and other tidal shifts. The lack of larger-than-life figures to take the credit or the blame can frustrate students who long for personal drama in the history they study. Children seem to instinctively gravitate to a vision of history driven by individual action, and while students develop a more complex understanding of causation as they mature, the notion that history is, in Thomas Carlyle's words, "but the biography of great men" persists in popular culture. In a recent article in *Perspectives*, Terrie Epstein notes that U.S. students are particularly prone to "overestimate the significance of great individuals as forces for change" (37). This trend is apparent in Atlantic world history; in *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*, for example, Camilla Townsend comments ruefully on the popular tendency to see Pocahontas as more influential than she actually was and to believe that if she had lived longer, the whole history of Native American-European relations might have been more peaceful.

It's natural to yearn for human connection when studying history. One of the most insightful pieces of feedback I've gotten from my students is that they find themselves alienated by the relative absence, in the Atlantic world course, of the colorful characters who people their other history courses. We spend most of our time talking about cultural values, natural forces, imperial strategies, and power conflicts; the individuals who peopled the Atlantic world are implicitly present, but abstract, perhaps hard to fully imagine. Sometimes I try to bridge the gap with film. The film *Black Robe* (1991), based on Brian Moore's carefully researched novel of the same name, has proven invaluable in dramatizing Jesuit-Algonquin relations and helping students imagine what it was like to actually *be* in seventeenth-century Canada. The films *Mary Silliman's War* (1994) and *Amistad* (1997) have sometimes provided an entry point for discussing individual experiences of slavery, though both of them address the topic in glancing ways; I wish I could find a well-researched, accessible film that depicted, say, a Caribbean sugar plantation c. 1700, with slavery at the very center of the narrative.



"Baptism of Pocahontas," engraving by Robert Metzgeroth after John Chapman, part of the set National Rotunda Pictures, pub. C. Bohn (Washington, D.C., 1858-1864). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

In future years, I hope to heighten the human interest of the course by introducing a biographical writing assignment that will require each student to get closely acquainted with one individual who lived somewhere in the Atlantic world sometime between the mid-fifteenth and the mid-eighteenth century. But I already know that most of these life stories are likely to develop as stories of bafflement, frustration, tragedy, or at best, resilient response to the unexpected—the sheer scale of the Atlantic world and of the environmental, cultural, linguistic, and religious differences that its inhabitants encountered seem often to have defeated individual plans. The individuals who figure in Atlantic world courses tend to play a different role from, for example, the politicians, tycoons, and social reformers who figure in U.S. history survey courses—the former tend to represent particular cultures, social groups, or experiences, while the latter appear as agents of historical change.

If formal governments and pivotal individuals loom small in Atlantic world history, nature looms large. The land is a character in the history of any region of the world, but it is particularly prominent in the history of the Atlantic world, where early European travelers were both entranced and terrified by the natural environment of the Americas, and later Atlantic peoples, European, African, and Native American, found their lives transformed by a monumental exchange of plants, animals, and diseases. Studying Atlantic world history is a wonderful—if initially disorienting—opportunity for students to learn what environmental history is, with the Columbian Exchange being the conventional entry point. This is doubly important in U.S. schools and universities because U.S. schools tend to devote relatively little time to geography, and students consequently lack the habit of thinking geographically.

With neither powerful governments nor pivotal individuals to drive the story forward, and with nature a powerful presence, Atlantic world history tends to unfold in a rambling, non-linear fashion that is as much thematic or regional as chronological. In my course, I teach the same century and a half (roughly 1550-1700) over and over again, first from an environmental perspective, then from a Spanish perspective, then Portuguese, then French, then Dutch and English, then from the perspective of the slave trade and the emergence of African-American culture. We move around more in space and in culture than in time, examining the same problems repeatedly in different settings and from different angles.

The inherently comparative nature of Atlantic world history makes particular demands of both teachers and students. Some students find they have to rethink how to take notes or how to study for tests in a course in which comparison is the dominant mode of analysis. For my part, I've had to rethink how to structure discussion and assessments. In class, I often point out a basic problem—securing a labor force, for example, or recruiting settlers—and ask students to identify the range of options for addressing it and to discuss which strategies were employed when, where, by whom, and why. A type of question I've found useful on assessments is to ask students to evaluate how someone told a story—in a primary source, in a textbook, or in a film—and if

possible to complicate the story with additional context or other participants' perspectives. Sometimes I ask students to imagine how a historian they have studied would endorse or critique a particular version of events. Historians are still at an early stage of writing Atlantic world history, and students are often critical of the narratives they read. Trying to imagine how to complicate, sharpen, or bring order to these narratives can nudge them into an understanding of the choices historians have to make and the difficulties they face in constructing accounts of the Atlantic world.

A unexpected bonus of teaching Atlantic world history is that it has led me to think more deeply about how students, and presumably the public, think history works. In many respects, the history of the Atlantic world from the fifteenth century forward is a good match for students' expectations of what world history is like. It is complex, competitive, commercial, emphatically cross-cultural, violent, improvisational, and creative. On the other hand, the aspects of Atlantic world history that take students by surprise present valuable opportunities to enrich their understanding of historical change. History is often messy; many of the things that happen are not the products of deliberate political actions or well-considered ideas. Human beings aren't the only actors; nature, whether in the form of stormy oceans, rich or rocky soil, or infectious diseases, matters a lot. To discover that great men don't always shape their times, that governments struggle to implement policies across great distances and against the popular will, that nature lashes out and fights back, can even be comforting to a student of history. Certainly, I often find myself glad to be teaching a course in which I can challenge students to consider the limits of individual decision-making and of human beings' ability to dominate nature.

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I would like to thank all six of my Atlantic World classes, particularly the 2012-2013 class, for their thoughtful comments on the syllabus and the structure of the course.

## Further Reading:

Two good starting points for those designing Atlantic world history courses are Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concept and Contours* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005) and Karen Kupperman, *The Atlantic in World History* (New York, 2012). Christine Daniels and Michael V. Kennedy, eds., *Negotiated Empires: Centers and Peripheries in the Americas, 1500-1820* (New York, 2002) is a collection of essays I have found useful in teaching; this collection includes Jack P. Greene's essay "Transatlantic Colonization and the Redefinition of Empire in the Early Modern Era: the British-American Experience." Jack P. Greene and Philip D. Morgan, eds., *Atlantic History: A Critical Appraisal* (New York, 2009) is another, more recent collection of essays. John H. Elliott, *Empires of the*

*Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492-1830* (New Haven, 2006) is a provocative work comparing two of the great Atlantic empires.

Recent textbooks on the Atlantic world include Douglas R. Egerton, et al., *The Atlantic World: A History, 1400-1888* (Wheeling, Ill., 2007), Thomas Benjamin, *The Atlantic World: Europeans, Africans, Indians, and Their Shared History, 1400-1900* (New York, 2009), and John K. Thornton, *A Cultural History of the Atlantic World, 1250-1820* (Cambridge, 2012). In lieu of a single textbook, I often assign Alan Taylor, *American Colonies* (New York, 2001) and Mark A. Burkholder and Lyman L. Johnson, *Colonial Latin America* (6<sup>th</sup> ed., New York, 2008). On slavery, I usually assign John K. Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800* (New York, 1998); Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998) is another illuminating, and very different, work on the development of African-American culture.

Terrie Epstein discusses students' propensity to attribute historical change to pivotal individuals in "Preparing History Teachers to Develop Young People's Historical Thinking," *Perspectives on History* (May 2012): 36-39. Camilla Townsend analyzes the mythology as well as the life of Pocahontas in *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma* (New York, 2004).

The seminal work on the environmental history of colonial North America is William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York, 1983). Shawn William Miller, *Environmental History of Latin America* (New York, 2007) is an excellent recent work that can also serve to introduce students to environmental history as a mode of inquiry. Alfred Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (30<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition, Westport, Conn., 2003) remains a classic.

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